

captured
C.P. Richter. The Effects of domestication and Selection on the Behavior of the Norway Rat. Jour. of the National Cancer Institute, Vol. 15, No. 3. December 1954 pp. 727-737. p.729

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In our experience wild Norway rats, when trapped while young, can be trained by constant handling so that they can be held in the hand without danger. Although obviously highly nervous, they remain tame as long as they are handled and well fed. When, however, they are not handled and are left to themselves, they generally become wild and unmanageable and make use of the first opportunity to escape. For this reason, and since children quickly tire of them, rats have never made good pets.

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The wild Norway rat lives in an environment in which it must constantly be on the alert and ready to fight for its existence. It has to defend itself against all kinds of enemies: other rats, dogs, cats, owls, and snakes, as well as man. It is a fierce, aggressive, suspicious animal that attacks at the least provocation and in captivity, takes advantage of the least opportunity to escape, remains suspicious and tense, and breeds poorly.

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We believe that selection has played the most important part in the process of domestication. By selection we mean here not the natural selection of wild rats in their natural habitat, where the fiercest, wildest and strongest - the fittest for that type of environment - survive, but selection in the artificial environment of the laboratory where the fittest for this type of environment survive: those that are most gentle and fertile. The two life stages in which the selection process has the most effect are during mating and nursing. In captivity wild rats do not mate well. In only a few out of many instances when rats are put together does a pregnancy result. It is likely that only the tamest of the rats mate. This



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is probably true of each succeeding generation as well - so that the tamer rats are more apt to propagate their own characteristics, including presumably the smaller adrenals, etc.

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In marked contrast, the healthy domesticated Norway rat is tame, gentle, and trusting, does not bite unless frightened or hurt, and makes no attempt to escape. It lives placidly in the controlled environment of the laboratory where food, water, shelter and safety are constantly assured. Its only contributions to its own survival are its feeding, drinking, grooming and mating activities. It reproduces at an early age and with a rapid rate. Like other domesticated animals it has shown numerous mutations. Castle, a pioneer worker in this field, listed 23 strains that breed true.

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After the young are born, wild mothers, with rare exception, eat their entire litter, so that at this stage a severe screening process occurs. The rats that do survive these two stages must be the least apprehensive, and so through successive generations they should produce progressively tamer animals.



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